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SUBJECT: SOUTHWEST CHINA MUSLIM POPULATION GROWING

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CLASSIFIED BY: James A. Boughner, Consul General, United States
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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Poor environmental and living conditions where many Muslims live in China's northwest have contributed to the expansion the Muslim population in the country's southwest provinces. Almost all of Sichuan Province's 200 Imams receive both religious and Arabic language training from Chinese teachers in China, having little opportunity for contact with foreign teachers. Muslim children usually learn the Koran in their homes or in mosques, but there is no formal system for youth education in Sichuan's mosques. Seventeen Muslims from Sichuan participated in the Haj in 2006. The Government may offer financial assistance to mosques in need of repair and in financial difficulties. The mixed ages of Muslim believers and the presence of young and energetic Imams in Sichuan contrasts with the overall aging Christian and Catholic populations in official churches in the province. End Summary.

¶2. (U) On February 1, CG, Congenoff and Consulate Economic Assistant met with Guo Gaoming, Secretary General of the Sichuan Islamic Association to discuss the status of Islam in Southwest China.

Demographics of Muslim Population in Southwest China

¶3. (SBU) Guo said southwest China's Muslim population is growing partly due to the poor environmental and living conditions where many Muslims live in China's northwest. Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, and Chongqing all experience incoming migration from Muslims who come to engage in small businesses. He attributed the recent growth of the Muslim population in Chengdu to the fact the city has become a transportation hub and information center, while historically, it was Yunnan which had more Muslim migrants.

¶4. (SBU) Guo stated there are 112,780 Muslims in Sichuan Province and 18,483 in Chengdu (Note: These numbers likely do not take into consideration the migrant population or those with household registrations outside of the province). Guizhou has approximately 170,000 Muslims and Yunnan has even more, said Guo. Sichuan has 125 mosques and 19 Islamic Associations. Chengdu has 8 big mosques and almost every county in Chengdu has one. The Huangchen Mosque where the offices of the Sichuan Islamic Association are located, is the largest in the province.

(Note: the current Mosque dates to 1997. When the more historic former structure was torn down in 1997, it led to a series of demonstrations by Chengdu Muslims that lasted for approximately one month. End Note.)

¶5. (SBU) In response to a question about the age range of Muslims in Sichuan, Guo responded that unlike the Catholic and Christian churches, Islamic believers had a wide age range, including many younger adherents. (Note: In post's experience, the majority of attendees at services in both the Three Selves Patriotic Christian Churches and official Catholic church are elderly women. End Note).

¶6. (U) Almost 98 percent of Muslims in China, including Sichuan, are Sunni, according to Guo. He opined that there are generally no conflicts between Sunnis and Shiites in China. He indicated that both groups came to China over 1,000 years ago. The first Islamic missionary in China was from Iran and came during the Tang Dynasty. He started a mission in Shantai County, Sichuan.

Training of Imams

¶7. (SBU) Guo said there are approximately 200 Imams (Chinese: "Ahongs") in Sichuan. Almost all of them receive both religious and Arabic language training in China with Chinese teachers. The Sichuan Islamic Association, in coordination with the Central level Islamic Association, occasionally provides opportunities for Ahongs to travel to Islamic countries for further education. In recent years, 10 individuals, who were selected through a religious and Arabic language testing process, have had this opportunity. The participants in these programs generally travel to Egypt and Pakistan.

¶8. (C) Interaction inside of China with foreign Muslims is limited. According to Guo, there is a regulation permitting foreign religious teachers on condition of approval from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but no foreign Islamic

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teachers have come to Sichuan to work. Guo stated there was regular intra-province interaction with other mosques and that members of the community also know their co-believers in other parts of China, even though he did not directly admit to vibrant religious exchanges outside the province. He remarked that members of Chengdu's Pakistani community do not come to the Huangcheng mosque to worship. (Note: Pakistan is in the process of establishing a consulate in Chengdu and has had engineers working with Chinese firms in the area on fighter aircraft development projects for a number of years. End Note).

¶9. (C) CG chatted briefly in Arabic with one of four young Imams present at the meeting. Guo and several other attendees at the meeting did not understand the conversation and appeared somewhat nonplussed. The Imam, who remarked he could also speak and read Uighur, told CG he had studied in Yemen and Egypt. (Note: All 4 Imams made a speedy exit when Guo began a listing of Communist slogans on "harmonious society," and returned at the end of the meeting. End Note.)

Education and Worship for the Young and Female Muslims

¶10. (SBU) Guo explained that Muslim children usually learn the Koran in their homes or in mosques. However, there is no formal system for youth education in the mosques. The ability of families to provide Arabic language instruction to their children depends on the family's economic situation. As for the religious practice of Muslim women, Guo said women worship separately from men, but participate equally with men in all other religious activities.

The Haj

¶11. (SBU) Guo said pilgrimage to Mecca is organized by the National Islamic Association. As incomes increase in southwest China, more people want to participate. In 2006 approximately

9,600 Muslims from China, including himself and 16 others from Sichuan, participated in the Haj. In response to a question from CG, Guo responded that no one from Sichuan had received financial support from the Saudi Arabia Government for the pilgrimage. The Saudi Government has provided financial support for one Sichuan Muslim to study in an Islamic country, he added.

Financial Support for Mosques

¶12. (SBU) Asked how mosques support themselves, Guo explained the government encourages religious organizations to be self-supporting. However, if mosques are too old, need repair or restoration, and are in financial difficulties, the government may offer some economic assistance. Huangcheng Mosque, the place of worship of several hundred Chengdu Muslims, was rebuilt in 1997 with government funding. Guo added that several thousands believers generally participate in important religious festivals.

Muslim Views of the United States

¶13. (SBU) When asked how Sichuan Muslims view the United States, Guo said that from a national perspective, China and the United States have a very good relationship. Muslims in China, like other ethnic groups, should "stay in line" with the principles of the country to build a "people-centered" and "harmonious" society.

Comment

¶14. (C) The mixed ages of Muslim believers and the presence of young and energetic Imams in Sichuan contrasts with the aging Christian and Catholic populations in the province. There is clearly information exchange occurring between different Muslim communities in the southwest and some opportunity for overseas travel for Imams. While the observation might be only anecdotal in nature, Post has noted on a number of travels within the district the interest of young Muslims in studying Arabic. Even in Lhasa, we were impressed to find a young Hui Muslim working in a mosque close to the Jokhang, Tibetan Buddhism's most holy temple, who could speak Arabic. The young man indicated he had been taught Arabic by his Imam who learned it while "studying in South Dakota."

BOUGHNER